

4-13-1999

We must learn to compromise so all may win

David R. Bowen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/db-columns>

Preferred Citation

[Title], David Bowen Collection. Congressional and Political Research Center, Mississippi State University Libraries.

This Document is brought to you for free and open access by the David Bowen Digital Collections at Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in News Columns by an authorized administrator of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com.

We must learn to compromise so all may win



Reader Editorial Board

"Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." Ralph Waldo Emerson said it, and he was right.

As we move to the end of a century and a millennium, we have seen our American society become less tolerant, less reasonable, less flexible, less moderate, less compromising — in short, more polarized, more hostile and more extreme — but, as some see it, more consistently faithful to our principles.

Congress is a microcosm of the American society that elected it. Not too long ago, Congress was a more collegial, a more congenial, a more cooperative place. Today, in the name of consistency of principle, it is not.

Democrats say it began in the early 1980s with Newt Gingrich, his fire and brimstone conservative rhetoric and his hostility to compromise. Republicans say it began when the Democrats lost congressional control in 1994 and their liberal wing was not willing to work with Republicans.

Federal gerrymandering

The changing makeup of congressional districts, created by federal judicial gerrymandering, has also contributed to the problem. Ethnic, racial and interest group leaders have demanded that their people be bundled together in separate districts, which has increased their visibility but reduced their influence.

Instead of districts with a broad-band of population electing moderate Democrats, and Republicans who represent whites and blacks and Hispanic and labor and management and farmers and environmentalists, we have a different kind of politics. Now we often find black congressmen who do not represent whites and white congressmen who pay no attention to blacks. The same can be said of city councils and state legislatures.

Demands for "consistency" in adhering to liberal or conservative positions have made it difficult to resolve important public issues, such as school prayer, affirmative action, gun control, crime and punishment, free speech, gay rights, abortion and women's rights. Single-issue politics and political litmus tests have changed the landscape.

Compromise oils the wheels of progress, perhaps even survival, in a democracy.

In a nation where, as we are often reminded, half way into the next century there will be no majority racial or ethnic or religious or economic group, it becomes even more necessary that we learn how to be more "inconsistent." Instead of demanding all that we want, and losing, we must learn how to achieve some of what we want so others may have some of what they want.

Sense of community

We need to find a way to restore the sense of community (which requires cooperation and compromise) in our public institutions and our society.

We have lost that in the last quarter century, brought about by demands for individual rights, individual freedom, individual license — and an extension of those into a fragmented, Balkanized, segregated society in which racial, ethnic and gender organizations demand group rights and group entitlements.

The true believers will remind us that Emerson referred to "foolish" consistency and not their own principle moral stands.

But, just as we must make moral compromises among competing values in our personal lives, we must, even more so, in a diverse nation accept public compromises in order to live and prosper together.

So, next time, try a little less consistency, and don't let the hobgoblin get you.



David Bowen of Jackson is a member of *The Clarion-Ledger's* Reader Editorial Board. Bowen, a writer and consultant, is a former member of Congress, who represented Mississippi's 2nd District.